Prairie Pod Transcript

Season 4, Episode 40: Holiday Bonus Episode

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Guest(s): Marissa Ahlering (The Nature Conservancy), Sara Vacek (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), Louise Spiczka (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources), Ben Walker (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), Erik Runquist (Minnesota Zoo), and Gwen Westerman (Minnesota State University, Mankato)

Podcast audio can be found online at mndnr.gov/prairiepod

((cheery, holiday music))

Megan: Hey, Mike.

Mike: Megan, happy holidays, Megan.

Megan: Happy holidays to you. It was really nice to hear you sing a little bit before we actually press record release.

Mike: *Feliz Navidad*... OK, I'm stopping.

Megan: Now. Now our visitors, our listeners know that you actually have a passing singing voice.

Mike: Passing? Thank you.

Megan: Appreciate that was the best compliment I could come up with.

((Laughter))

Megan: OK. It is the holiday time, so let me give you a better compliment. Mike, you have a seasonally appropriate singing voice.

Mike: Is that better? OK.

Megan: I feel like it is. I feel like you should take it when you're ahead. I'm so excited about this show that we put together this year.

Mike: I love this episode. It may be my favorite. I don't know. It's anyway. It is so much fun to record.

Megan: I think there's just something about taking the time to reflect. So, you know, winter for me and you, I know. Certainly it's just filled with data analysis and critical thinking and all the all the hard stuff.

Mike: Meetings.

Megan: Meetings and spreadsheets. And it's nice to take a moment to reflect about what you learned from the prairie this year that you saw what you discovered a moment that you had a moment that you laughed at yourself, a moment that you cried. I just think that the prairie is always there.

Mike: Well said.

Megan: You have to be ready to discover it. And so it's nice this time of year to just take a moment and look back and think about all of those beautiful experiences we had and some of them we got to have together.

Mike: Even better. Yeah. What do we do? I can't remember.

Megan: We got to do some monitoring a little bit. You know, we got to go out a hole in the mountain.

Mike: Well, that's right. Absolutely.

Megan: We got to frolic.

Mike: I'm sorry. I forgot for a second there. But how could I?

Megan: Clearly, it was as memorable for you as it was for me. All of my singing compliments from earlier stand. The singing assessment stands from the beginning of the episode! I thought we shared a beautiful moment together on the prairie, and here I come to find out you've already forgotten it. Wow.

Mike: I'm really sorry about that.

Megan: It's upsetting.

Mike: Well, let's let's move on to our first guest. Shall we change the subject?

Megan: Let's do it.

Mike: OK, let's get this holiday episode started off right. Here is a heartwarming story by Marissa Ahlering, lead scientist with the Nature Conservancy (TNC).

Marissa Ahlering (TNC): Well, the story I want to tell today is basically about how I fell in love with the prairie and then how I'm trying to instill that love of the prairie in my daughters. So, I came to my love of the prairie late in life. I wasn't running around and frolicking on a prairie as a kid. My parents are city people, and so we visited National Parks and camped at Holiday Inns. But when I went to college, I went to college in Nebraska and I started doing some undergraduate research on butterflies and prairies. And I spent two summers wandering around tallgrass prairies around Omaha, Nebraska. They were just tiny little pieces, but I loved them and I loved the, you know, just getting out there and seeing all of the things that you can see and that you don't see

from the road or as you're driving by and realizing, Oh my gosh, this prairie is alive with so many things! So, that's where I really fell in love with prairies, and they've become a pretty important part of my life since then. When I started my job at the Nature Conservancy a couple of years later, I had my first daughter. I knew I really wanted to instill a love of prairies in her right from the beginning. And so fortunately, I was able to drag her around in the field with me, even as a baby. So she went out on bird surveys with me in a baby carrier. So actually, you know, not doing any official data collection because you never know when a baby is going to scream. And I'm sure that doesn't do great things to detection probabilities, but you know, training people to do bird surveys. She marched around in the field with me and then. And at one point, actually in one of the sites, we were staying in the field housing. At that point, this was, you know, nine years ago or so. And one of our field houses was an old farmhouse. And so, one afternoon I put her down for a nap and I shut the door and I went, Oh, I forgot something. I went back to go in to get something, and the door had locked behind me, and she had gotten locked into this bedroom by herself as a baby. In this old farmhouse! I'm like, No way to get this door down. So fortunately, it was an old farmhouse and it was on the first floor. So we had to go around and like, take off the screen and shimmy up the window and crawl through the window to make sure to unlock the door. And she slept through the whole thing, thank goodness, but kind of stressed me out as a new mom. So we had some adventures as mom and baby in the field, but in general, it was good. And so she's been out in the prairie with me a lot. She also had the opportunity to go out and see the Dakota skippers released when we were doing that at a hole in the mountain. And so I definitely think that. And then I had another daughter who's also traipsed around in the field with me. And so I definitely think that they appreciate the prairie more than I did as a kid, because when we read The Lorax, they look at me and they say, “Mommy, do you speak for the grass?” I say, “yes, I speak for the grass.” And so, yeah, it's been great, and I definitely can tell that they are prairie people, because in the spring now, you know, the snow melts. We live pretty close to Bluestem Prairie, one of our TNC preserves in northwest Minnesota. And we've got a family tradition now. We go out to see, you know, in the early spring, the snow is melting, who can find the first pasqueflower. So we will go out on a regular basis and hike around the prairie and hunt for the pasqueflowers, which is one of my favorite prairie species. And so they enjoy that. Who gets to be the first person to see the first pasqueflower of the year? So, yeah, I think it's, you know, prairies are really important to me and I love weaving them into my life and I'm super excited to share them with my daughters, you know? I want them to love all ecosystems. But I definitely wouldn't be sad if they love prairies the most.

Megan: We wouldn't be sad either, Marissa. We need more people speaking for the grass and the wildflowers and the soil. Yeah, grassland birds for Mike. There you go.

Marissa: Yep, for sure.

Mike: Raising them, right, Marissa!

Marissa: Yeah.

Megan: I just love how Marissa describes coming to the prairie and how she's passing on that love to her daughters and weaving it into their lives. It's such a good reminder

that prairie is not reserved for an elite few. The prairie is for all of us. Whether you're a passerby, scientist, naturalist, a native person, the prairie is here waiting for you to discover it. Our next story is by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wildlife biologist Sara Vacek. And it contains key prairie takeaways, patience, support, and my favorite humility, coupled with the ability to laugh at yourself.

Sara Vacek (U.S. FWS): So my story from the year is, I think, a little bit self-deprecating, so maybe not exactly inspirational, but it's been making me laugh the more I think about it. So, in 2019, we started a prairie reconstruction project here on our prairie at home. It had been restored in the late nineties to one of those old school three warm-season big tall grass cultivar mixes. And it was in a Fish and Wildlife Service conservation easement before we purchased the property. And it was fine. It was some, you know, nice grassland at least, and in a nice big grassland landscape. So we didn't worry about it too much. But over the years it started to get taken over by a Kentucky bluegrass, and even we started losing some of the warm-season natives. And so we had been talking off and on about trying to get some more diversity in there. And we were able to work with because it's in this Fish and Wildlife Service easement, we were able to work with our partners biologist and get some grant funding to do a reconstruction on part of the property. So in 2019, we seeded about 55 acres or so of this grassland. Pretty standard, you know, nothing too earth shattering in the methods that we used or anything like that. But what I've come to notice is that the tables are turned on us a little bit here. When you're the landowner for a project like this, it's a very different perspective than when you're the practitioner or the biologist studying those reconstructions. And the way I was explaining it to someone the other day was, you know, when you're doing monitoring or research of any kind, you're sort of thinking about a population, right? Like if we're doing a bird survey, we're thinking about the population of birds, not an individual bird and kind of the same thing. When I'm doing prairie monitoring, I'm thinking about what's working on average across all the prairies that we're managing. And in our office, at least in a lot of other offices in our area, we're working at scale, right? So we're restoring many prairies in any given year and there's a lot going on and a lot of moving parts. And so if somebody is a little concerned about some thistle on their prairie, we tell them, don't worry, just don't worry about all this. All the research says that thistle is going to go away. It'll be fine. We have a lot of thistle in our prairie. And so somebody will call our partners biologist' Alex. He'll check in with us and see how things are. How are things looking? And it's like he has to be my counselor and give my words back to me that I've been giving to him all these years as the biologist, consulting our managers, saying, Don't worry about the thistle. I promise this study that we did helped, you know, shows that it won't be a problem. Just give it a few years, let the prairie get established and he's like parroting my own words right back at me to help me feel OK about things. And it has been really fun and a different perspective to watch this thing developing kind of real time because another kind of downfall or just a different thing about when we're doing these reconstructions and have so many of them going on, we might visit one once or twice in our growing season to check in on things. Well, this we see every single day and all those little changes that happen every single day. So it's been it's been fun, but it's also been a very different perspective on things. And I have a whole new level of patience for all of our private landowners and all of our maybe newer managers who haven't done a lot of prairie reconstructions or don't have a lot of them

under their belt to see how things look ten years down the road. So if anybody ever panics again about Canada thistle in the first two years of a seeding, I have a very different level of patience with them than I did in the past.

Megan: I love that.

Sara: So that's my story.

Megan: So, you're having to take your own advice here. But like through Alex's voice instead of your voice.

Sara: Exactly.

Mike: I commend you for your courage with the thistle, Sara.

Sara: Trying really hard to be patient with it.

Megan: Sara is such a good storyteller, and I love that she ended up having to take her own advice. It's something we all need to remember: patience while the prairie rebuilds, adapts, changes and evolves. It occurs to me that as we learn and sometimes re-learn these life lessons that every year I find the prairie has something new to teach me, something new to discover, to find and to uncover. They are lands filled with wisdom and change. This summer, one of DNR's is Assistant Area Wildlife managers got some firsthand experience sharing in that wisdom while they worked to pull off an over1000 acre prescribed burn. Here's Louise now to share with you what she learned.

Louise Spiczka (DNR Asst. Area Wildlife Manager): Yeah, so I'm going to tell a little bit of a story about a prairie burn we did this spring and we were very restricted on our burns this year because of COVID protocols and whatnot, so it took a little bit of effort to get this burn to come together. It was a very large burn. It was my first bossing, my first burn over 1000 acres. So it's about 1160 acres. And Megan knows this unit is our Moen unit. It's a big tract of land that's got a lot of remnant prairie on it and you know, it's got a lot of brome and tree issues as well. And so we were given quite possibly the most perfect day to burn this parcel this--spring late May. I tried two other times this spring a to burn and with how dry everything was--one of our lines was right next to the river and there is a lot of concern about with as low as the river was. We had to use a south wind and that very easily could have carried fuel across the river and lit stuff up on the other side of the river. And then there were some islands that had some fuels that Walt didn't have any experience in, and I didn't have an experience in. It was these big, wild cucumber vines that we just didn't know what the heck was going to happen with those. So we wanted to make sure that it wasn't too dry. So the first day and I had to get together about 21 people to do this burn, and it was pretty difficult because I was pulling people from TNC from Brainerd and Morris and South Dakota and part of the roving crew. And then some Marshall office people and Appleton folks and stuff like that, so it made it a challenge just to try to get everybody together and then, you know, keep with the protocols we were doing. You know, we had to do all of our briefings outside and, keep everybody to one vehicle and where we were going to park people. So the first

time I was going to try, it was way too dry, then super concerned about things going across the river in the second time in earlier May, even more concerned with the dryness. And then we ended up getting a good shot of rain and the river came up. But the fuels were just so incredibly dry. So it was the very end of May and everybody kind of came together. And like I say, we were just blessed with this perfect, perfect day. I mean, we couldn't have had anything better and we started the fire and things were kind of slow just because everything was greening up. I mean, the brome was super green, and it was kind of like we had a little bit higher of a humidity than what would have been opportune on a regular year, but just with as dry as the fuels were it ended up being perfect. So everything burned, incredibly slow. We had some private land adjoining it that had a ton of remnant prairie and that hadn't been burned for years and years and years. And so everything backed really, really slow. And there was something like 75 power poles we had to protect and two interior structures, home places (private residences) and, you know, obviously a ton of downed trees in the floodplain. But we ended up closing the box and sent everybody home, and it had started raining about maybe about two hours before we closed the box, you know? And so it just what's I mean, what's what could be worse for a prescribed burn than it's starting to rain? I mean, I've had it snow before, but what could be worse than it's starting to rain? I mean, the clouds got really thick and the humidity went way up, and I kind of started to get nervous if we were even going to be able to close this thing off or what was going to happen. And but we just everybody just kept plugging through and it was kind of funny. It's literally raining and we lit the head fire on this thing and it just moved slow. It didn't do like a normal fire. It didn't do like these gigantic flames and just rushed together. It just moved like at this perfect speed across the landscape and it ate every last little green piece of that brome. It couldn't have been any better with that moisture and that rain and the dryness of the fuels. It just, it backed, so slow. And so I ended up sending everybody home. I'm sitting on the road and I'm just watching this three quarters of a mile line of fire while it's on and off raining just back across the prairie. I mean, you couldn't have asked for anything better. Like I say, we were given this perfect day, even though everything was not perfect burn-wise. I mean, it was humid, it was raining and, you know, it wasn't forecasted to rain. It wasn't, you know, forecasted to get that humid. So I just watched this thing back and in the morning when I went back, we still had live fire and it was actually just continuing to burn across all of this brome and it would hit these native patches. So we went back and we re-lit like another 80 acres and burnt off some of the prairie and then a couple more people, Walt and a couple of other people lit down in the bottoms and everything burned out. And when it came back this summer, I don't think I've-- I don't think I've ever had anything come back as nice as it did. I mean, we had, we did see harvest out there this year. We got a bunch of dropseed. Liz from TNC, said she's never seen that much dropseed in one spot, so it did, it was the most beneficial burn that I think I've ever been a part of. Just going back and seeing what it was. It just the brome was just so set back. It was just such a perfect time. And then with the dryness, I think over the summer, I don't even think it got a chance to really come back towards the end of the summer. So, it just-- it was incredible. Yeah, conditions were crazy-- opposite of what you would think would have made for a successful burn, but it was a huge success.

Mike: That's a good lesson there. Louise, I was thinking, so this was your first burn to be the boss of, is that right?

Louise: No, I've bossed other burns too. Yeah. I've been a burn boss for a couple of years and I've bossed some larger fires in that 7-800 acre range, you know, 2-300 acres and some smaller ones, too. But this was my first like, massive big burn. You know, we had three different divisions and 21 people. We had some really good cooperation from the Nature Conservancy and the roving crew and then all these wonderful people from southwest Minnesota that joined in to help.

Megan: Sounds like you're going to be hired to boss some big burns elsewhere, too, because you know, once they hear this, they're going to be like that Louise Spiczka is good. She does perfect burns is what I heard.

Louise: No, no, no, no, no, no, no. It had nothing to do with me. It was all conditions, all conditions.

Mike: So the key to the conditions again was a combination of like drought and then doing it on the day that it rained lightly.

Louise: Yeah, I really think so. I do. I really think that that higher moisture just allowed everything just to like, sit and stew and back really slow. And I think with it being late May that brome was kind of in the perfect spot, it was green and it wasn't like in the perfect spot, just to fry and die, I feel.

((Laughter))

Megan: Fry and die.

Mike: Fry and die.

Mike: OK. There is another example of our prairie managers passing along their experience, their wisdom through stories. I love it. You know, it's also great how our managers, you know-- it seems like the stories they tell, they continue to express surprise. You know, even these, even these managers that have been there for decades, they just seem to be learning something basically every day they're out there managing the prairie just because of the complexity of prairie. Yeah, constantly learning, constantly being surprised. And so speaking of surprise. Our next storyteller is Ben Walker, wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Go ahead, Ben.

Ben Walker (Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service): So my story is all about how the prairie can kind of throw some curveballs when I'm out with interns, you know, especially if we’re having a bad day or something like that. I usually tell them that, you know, these are the days that are going to kind of be scorched in your memory. These days are going to be the ones you remember. No one is going to remember those perfect days where the sun is shining bright and everything goes exactly according to plan. So my story doesn't start off that way, though it started off as one of those perfect days. It was early April. It was one of my first years when I was at Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge and I was out searching for prairie chickens. I made a couple

stops, didn't really hear a whole lot. And then my next stop was going to be up top of a Beach Ridge, and I figured it might be a good spot to see if I can hear any in the area. And so I got out and it was just, you know. Completely still, there is no wind, you know, the sun was just starting to kind of pop up over the horizon and it's just kind of a frosty morning. It's just one of those like, you know, picture perfect days. And I thought, “Yeah, this is going to be the day I'm going to get so much done. I'm going to fight all these leks, you know, and I get back to the office, everyone's going to cheer my name.” And so I open the door and the truck. And right as I got out, I heard the booming and you know, I thought, Oh my gosh, this is, this is right over the hill. Like, this is going to be a great spot for the viewing blind there. It's just going to be perfect. So right, as I kind of took a step away from the truck to get a better, better kind of, you know, angle to try to hear them, I went to shut my door. But at that kind of exact same moment, I was like, Oh my gosh, I'm going to, I'm going to scare the chickens away. So I did one of these like awkward kind of behind the hand ways to kind of, you know, slowly or soften the door shutting. And all I remember is this shearing pain coming, and I looked back and my thumb was caught in the door and it wasn't coming out of the door. And it was one of those things like, Oh, you know, you know, you can imagine, you know, you have an older brother and he's got you in that hold that says, like, you know, say, uncle kind of situations. That's kind of what’s going on. But,you know, my thumb was in the door. And so I was like, Oh, I just need to open the door to get this, but I lock the door right as I was kind of getting out. So it's one of those like I had that whole Aron Ralston 127 hours, like, am I going to have to cut my thumb off situation here? And you know, I looked up and the sun was over the horizon now, and it was just it was a picture perfect day, you know, and it was a situation where it wasn't that big of a deal. But my keys for the truck were in my right pocket and I was using my right hand in the door so I can only imagine. Yeah, luckily, no one drove by during this situation. Or I could, you know, it just would have been total chaos. And so, I was going through, I was like, You know, do I call my new supervisor and somehow tell him I'm stuck in a truck door? It was like these, like 30 kind of, you know, ideas are floating through my head as I'm trying to, like, play this horrible game of Twister to try to get the keys, you know? And they're, you know, if you're like sitting down in a car, it's impossible to get something out of your pocket. You know you're bent over. I'm trying to get these keys out of my pocket. I finally got the keys out and unlock the door. It was like instantly like, Yeah, you know, my thumbs throbbing. And it's like, I’m sure, I'm going to lose that nail, but it's like, you know, the chickens weren't fazed at all. All right. Well, we'll just kind of go about our day and we'll see how things go. So. that was kind of how the morning started. You know it. I got over the ridge and you know the lek that I thought was just over the ridge. You know, typical prairie chicken fashion ended up being about a mile kind of, you know, down the prairie. So I'm trudging through there and, you know, I ended up swamping my boots on some thin ice and you know, you get there and it's like, you know, I finally find this lek. You know, there's a great lek, you know, but it was like all those little pieces that kind of came together that made the day in the end, it, it didn't really matter. You know, it was just kind of a weird series of ups and downs. But, you know, while I’m of sitting there with my finger in the truck, it's again, it's like it's one of those like time kind of stops still. I can tell you exactly--you know what that crisp air kind of smelled like. I can tell you the colors of the sunset. You know, it was. It was just one of those

experiences that's kind of, you know, with you forever. And that's--I tell this story to my interns to and they just kind of poke fun and laugh at me-- you know, but it's fun. It's true. I mean it's the prairie kind of throws you curveballs. You know, there's always ups and downs. You know, there's always beautiful things. There's always bright things there at the end, you know, and that's I think that's one of the great things about the prairie. You never know what's going to happen. You know, when you start your day, you think it's going to go one way, but it always kind of turns out a little bit different. You know, that was the only prairie chicken lek I found that day. It ended up taking me most the day. You know, by the time I found it got a good count on and, you know, hiked all the way back. And, it was that kind of experience, you know, it makes me really kind of look forward to that time of year. You know, every year when I have the opportunity to go out and try to find new prairie chicken leks. And the big thing now is I'm typically just much more careful of where my hands are when I shut the door.

Megan: Hilarious.

Mike: So I feel so bad, laughing, so hard when your thumb was stuck in the truck.

Megan: So I think all the listeners want to know, did you lose the nail?

Ben: I did, I did. It stuck with me for probably, I don't know, four or five days after that and then it just fell right off.

Mike: No scarring?

Ben: Oh no, no, this thumb is 100% healed, you know, no long term damage.

Megan: And every time you look at that thumb now, you think about that beautiful day where you got to see prairie chickens. If you just happen to give someone a thumbs up, you think that’s my prairie chicken thumbs up.

Mike: Awesome story.

Megan: I love that.

Mike: You know, it occurred to me. That is the second story on this holiday episode about a door closing and locking on someone by the prairie. The other one was Marissa Ahlering talking about it. So, people be careful with doors around the prairie. I think that's the lesson here then. Ben--that was a great story. Thank you. Thank you for that. Very entertaining. Next, we have Erik Runquist. He's a biologist with the Minnesota Zoo, talking about just a very cool project and a hopeful one.

Erik Runquist (Butterfly Conservation Biologist, Minnesota Zoo): So, I’m Erik Runquist. I have been. chasing butterflies since I was a little kid and I got lucky enough to get a job where I can do that, too at the Minnesota Zoo. I have the butterfly conservation biologist there and really now it's a pollinator conservation and prairie conservation biologist position. Because it's not just about a single group of animals, it's. Really, we're really interested in trying to save what we can a little bit by a little bit. We know, we’ve got to

start somewhere. So I've been managing a release program. A rearing and breeding release program for some of the world's most endangered, but least known of all organisms. Butterflies called the Dakota skipper, and we also have a program for the Powesheik skipperling, which is unfortunately no longer in Minnesota, as far as we can tell. But there's hope. I'm going to talk about Dakota skippers today, and so we've been rearing and breeding and releasing them at the Minnesota Zoo now since 2012 and. It's not just enough to be able to, you know, grow them at the Zoo. They need a place in the wild. Our rearing and breeding program is exactly like what you would do for a tiger or, you know, any other sort of those charismatic animals you think of at the Zoo. We follow the same set of protocols, tracking lineages and all those things. But. Really, the ultimate goal is to get them back out into the wild. These were, really common butterflies on Minnesota's prairies 20, 30, 40 years ago. Unfortunately, they're not anymore. And for Dakota skippers, there's only probably one spot left in the state that they remain historically. And these are little prairies just north of Fargo-Moorhead. On the Agassiz ridges. We've been able to now grow them at the Zoo for several years and establish a program and. Several thousand a year, we are able to be producing. The goal is to be able to kind of figure out how to get them back on the map. And what does it take to get the dots back on the map and then we can think about connecting those dots? So now for several years, we've been releasing, reintroducing, Dakota skippers back into a couple of sites in southwest Minnesota in Lincoln and Pipestone counties, especially in the Hole-in-the-Mountain complex. And this is a great, piece of rugged prairie. Basically, right where the glacier stopped 10,000 years ago and they pile up all these debris hills and dumped all the rocks in the gravel right there. And because of that, they are now rich in this really unusual gravel prairie. Dakota skippers used to be bouncing around all these hills for thousands of years, but then they vanished about 15 years ago, and we don't know why. In 2017, we began releasing them there. And in one of The Nature Conservancy properties. For a couple of years, we would be pumping out 3 or 400 a year into these prairies, but because of the nature of the way we do, the releases of just like opening up a box every day and letting a brand new batch of individuals go as they emerge from the pupa, we don't know who is who. So for a couple of years we were seeing individuals on the prairie and it was so exciting to see them doing exactly what we want them to be doing foraging on the wildflowers that they depend upon. Laying eggs in the wild, mating in the wilds and doing the things that we want them to do, where they're supposed to be doing it. But we can’t be sure of who was who for a couple of years because we weren't marking anybody until we decided to come up with a scheme called the party tent. And this allowed us to be placing individuals into the prairie, giving them a chance to be doing what they wanted, but not quite letting them go fully. So this is a 656 foot basically screening mesh cage over the prairie land. Those individuals could emerge in there and do their thing and their mating and breeding and laying a ton of eggs inside this little patch of prairie that had all of its provisions. Meanwhile, that allowed us to be doing surveys on the outside at the same time. And, after years of effort, I just about collapsed when I finally saw one outside the tent, that was clearly one of the children of the prior year's releases. That was the very first confirmation that Dakota skippers are beginning to reestablish populations at this site. And really, indeed, in all of southern Minnesota, in at least a decade. You know, we bring these out and we kind of feel like their parents. We knew

their grandparents, we collected their eggs from their great grandmothers in South Dakota on virtually identical prairies a few years earlier. But so we all of these, these baby Dakota skippers we're bringing out there, they are very much like our kids and the best thing we can hope is like, we're sending them off to college. We're letting them go out into the world and hoping that they can, you know, spread their wings and fly and do what we want them to be doing. And we just have to trust that they're going to do it. And they were doing it. So ,super relieved. And luckily, we've continued to see that now for a couple more years. We saw that again in 2021 and at another reintroduction site at one of the Hole-in-the-Mountain WMA's and then the adjacent Altona WMA. We saw them laying eggs in the wilds and even saw some of those eggs being viable. They were starting to hatch in the midst of the epic drought. They were there, they were surviving, they were returning back to the prairie, bringing one of those pieces back of that lost legacy. Makes me super proud knowing that the little kid who was chasing butterflies as a kid is now able to start bringing them back to a new place.

Megan: Oh, I love that story and such a hopeful ending. It's good! I do wonder like so you said there, you know, the release program is similar to what you would do for other wildlife like a tiger or something else. Now, on a fierceness scale, how fierce would you rate a Dakota skipper versus Tiger? Not that. Not that we like to put species in need against each other because they are all valuable…

Erik: No, no, of course not.

Megan: …but I was just curious, like are they pretty fierce?

Erik: Dakota skippers have attitude. They are about the size of your thumbnail. Orange little triangles, sitting on top of the coneflowers, but they defend those coneflowers. They chase away butterflies, even birds that are much larger than themselves. They've got attitudes. When they land they, they hold their wings in the shape of a fighter jet.

Megan: I love it.

Erik: And. Yeah, if you scale them up to, you know the size of a tiger. I don't know which one I would pick.

Megan: They're small, but mighty butterflies.

Erik: Exactly.

Megan: So, we're lucky that you're part of the effort to help bring them back.

Erik: That's right.

Megan: I think one of the things I love most about Prairie is that it provides me an opportunity to be hopeful. If something as small as a Dakota skipper can dare to reclaim its homeland. I can dare to do just about anything. Prairie is one of those special places that speaks to the soul. In our next segment, we're going to hear from Minnesota's poet laureate and Mankato State Professor of English literature and English studies and technical communication, Gwen Westerman, where I think she says it best when she says these places are "to write about, to sing about and to love."

Gwen Westerman:[speaking in Dakota] Haŋ mitakuyapi (Hello my relatives). Gwen Westerman emakiyapi ye. Hello, everyone. My name is Gwen Westerman and I am Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota and I live in southern Minnesota in the homeland of my Dakota ancestors. The Prairie has been part of my life since my earliest memories. I grew up in Kansas, and so that means I spent a lot of time driving through the Flint Hills, which my children call 'the middle of nowhere.' But I love that place. And you never see the same thing twice driving through there. There used to be a sign that said Antelope Restoration Area and I drove through for four or five years and never saw any antelope, and I thought maybe the sign was just, you know, an advertisement or a joke. But I came through there at sunrise one day and there were the antelope up on the ridge and the light was orange and peach and gold. And it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. So that's a place of openness, of vastness. And when I moved to Minnesota, I was overjoyed to see that, that prairie is this far north. But those rolling hills that start in northern Oklahoma go through Kansas and Nebraska and Iowa up into Minnesota, even into Manitoba are all part of that, that rolling prairie that to me is something to write about, to sing about and to love. Two of the most amazing experiences I had in that prairie in the Flint Hills were both at night. Driving through on Interstate 35. It's incredibly dark. I don't even know how to describe that much darkness. And the only interruption of that, that deep darkness is the speckled red lights of cell phone towers. And it's all around you. When you drive and it's almost like traveling through space, I would think that's what it made me think of that darkness of space and being enveloped by that darkness. And on one occasion, I came up over a high ridge and saw the most incredible display of lightning. It was an electrical storm. In the southwest and the lightning just moved across the sky in these brilliant flashes of white. And it was almost like a river of lightning as it moved across the horizon. And I pulled over to the side of the road just to watch it. And it was awe inspiring. It was--not frightening, but almost exhilarating to be there and see that kind of light and energy and power in the sky. Another time when I was driving through, going the same direction, going southwest, they were doing a range burn during the night and it was amazing to watch that orange and yellow flame move across again, much like the lightning moving like a river. The flames of that prairie burn were moving like a river. And I was overwhelmed. I didn't pull off the side of the road, though, because the emergency vehicles along the highway were telling people to keep on moving. But those two things-- just the power of natural forces on the prairie. Lightning storms and prairie fires that have probably occurred before there were human beings to witness it. That thought made me feel very small. Made me feel very humble at the power and beauty of this prairie land that we love.

Megan: I love that, Gwen, that's such a perfect story.

Mike: I really like, yeah, how both stories took place at night.

Megan: Yeah.

Mike: I don't spend enough time in the prairie at night.

Megan: I know. Maybe most people haven't.

Gwen: Or you don't spend enough time driving on the Interstate at night.

Megan: That too. That too.

Gwen: That too.

Megan: Yeah. But I love those moments where you get to feel and I do mean *get to feel* small because I think sometimes that's what makes me feel the most connected and the most humbled and the most appreciative. When I realize that everything that I'm striving for in my life and I'm fighting for, you know, we're fighting to save this prairie landscape. There are bigger things at work much, much, much bigger than my individual struggle or fight, or even day to day worries and concerns like the prairie is so much bigger than that, and the world is so much bigger than that. And I just love those small moments that you get to have.

Mike: Absolutely.

Gwen: I am. I grew up in Wichita, and I always had this desire and love for the ocean.

Mike: Mm hmm.

Gwen: Growing up in the middle of Kansas, and it didn't, it didn't dawn on me until I moved to Minnesota and I started writing about it. And in grade school, we were told, Well, yes, this used to be a vast inland sea. And it just never clicked in my little head. But I think that whatever remnants there are, whatever energy there is that was part of that sea, that movement of water is just cell deep, for me.

Mike: Yeah, we continue to talk. Here we go again, Megan again, another parallel between the ocean and prairie.

Megan: But Gwen just made it all make sense.

Mike: I know!

Megan: We've been making these parallels all along and we haven't understood why we keep making them. But Gwen just brought it all together for us.

Mike: She did, yeah.

Megan: You know the grass is like waves.

Gwen: Yes.

Megan: And so it's that same kind of peaceful energy and sometimes scary energy because of how wild the wind can be on the prairie, just like how wild the waves can be in the ocean. Gosh, you just wow. I never thought about that connection of fossils that used to be a sea. Gosh, you just made everything makes sense. Well, I mean, every time we're on here, I learn stuff.

Mike: Those two experiences with the fire and the lightning. I'm actually jealous of you. I really want to experience that.

Gwen: I know I wish I could see it again.

Megan: Well, we would be remiss if we didn't ask you after these amazing stories. For those who don't know, Gwen is our newest Minnesota's poet laureate. And so we would be so honored if you would share a poem with our listeners, as only you can do about the prairie.

Gwen: I'm happy to do that.

Mike: Awesome.

Gwen: This is. Root words.

Root Words

Prairie

grasses

have

roots

twice

as long

as their

height,

deep

footings

that steady

them against

unremitting winds

that sweep across

the plains. Their roots

reach beneath the parched

earth stricken by heat and cold

and nourish them on

the remnants of a vast

inland sea that

teemed with copious sounds

of life long ago.

Our language

is like those prairie grasses

surviving the fires

of missionaries and their gods,

floods of English words,

drought, growing

in unexpected places

as if it had never

been gone.

Dakota wicoie

k'a iapi

teuŋȟiŋdapi.

Maka kiŋ etaŋhaŋ

uŋhipi. Ikce

wicaśta teuŋȟikapi.

Megan: I love it. That's beautiful. I wanted to give it a little.

Mike: That's absolutely beautiful.

Megan: A beat of silence just to--

Mike: Oh you got to!

Megan: Just wanted it to resonate a little bit more with our listeners. Gosh, Gwen, thanks so much for being on this episode.

Mike: Thank you, Gwen.

Gwen: You're welcome. I was happy to do it. Now I want to go to Kansas.

Mike: That was awesome, Megan.

Megan: I know I just love listening to all those stories, they're so good.

Mike: Yeah, I love them too. So the reason you talked about it at the beginning, I think you nailed it right on the head. It just reminds us here in the middle of winter why we love the prairie.

Megan: Especially when you know, I'll admit it. I don't want to go outside when it's negative temperatures. I understand that I live in Minnesota now, and for the most part, I would say that I'm 92.9% Minnesotan because—

Mike: That's very precise.

Megan: I'm not going to go outside when there are warnings that say your face might fall off. I still find that to be challenging.

Mike: Ok, that's fair, yeah.

Megan: The prairie has strong winds. It's what I love about it in the summer. It's what I am scared about in the winter.

Mike: Well, you know, to cap off our this awesome episode, we have some, some good news to share.

Megan: We do have some good news to share. So you hear it all the time on this episode or on the whole season of the Prairie Pod every season of the Prairie Pod. We talk about diversity, connection, balance, and partnership, baby.

Mike: [singing] Partnerships.

Megan: We are so honored and delighted to expand the pod squad. And so coming soon. Season five—I'm feeling alive. We're going to have two very special co-hosts. Do you guys want to introduce yourselves? Sara, do you want to start.

Sara: Sure, I'm Sara Vacek and I'm the wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and I am stationed at the Morris Wetland Management District in Morris, Minnesota.

Mike: Welcome, Sara.

Sara: And I'm really excited to be here.

Megan: Welcome Sara!

Sara: Yay!

Megan: I feel like we should have the fake applause or something that we could insert after each one. It just sounds sorta sad with just me clapping by myself.

((All clapping))

Megan: Marissa, Why don't you introduce yourself?

Marissa: Yeah, thanks. So I'm Marissa Ahlering. I am the well, I was going to say, I'm the prairie ecologist. I'm actually, I am a prairie ecologist. I am now the lead scientist for the Nature Conservancy in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. But prairies are my love and I definitely sympathize with you, Mike, in that prairie grassland birds are also my first love as well, and I'm super excited to be here because I love to talk about all things prairie. And yeah, and hear people's stories and learn new things about the prairie because there's so much we still don't know. So getting people to love the prairie is definitely why I'm here to help us.

Mike: Wonderful

Marissa: Big shoes to fill though because I feel like you guys have done a wonderful job.

Megan: Aww

Mike: Gosh.

Sara: And I think one thing I'm excited about, too, is just that I get to work with all of you guys in a professional project kind of way or, you know, putting on field tours or work things. And this doesn't feel quite so much like a work thing. It feels like just like Marissa said, celebrating prairie together and hearing some of those stories together. So yeah, it's good.

Megan: Well, we're pumped that you're both here. And they both said yes, because this is going to make I just know the prairie pod even better for our listeners because we have different perspectives. Yeah, and it's just going to be great all around.

Mike: Yeah, I'm looking forward to listening and not having to be part of the show. It'll be it'll be a real pleasure, you know.

Megan: Wow. What are you saying?

Mike: That may have sounded worse than I intended. I am honestly looking forward to listening, though.

Megan: Yeah, yeah, it's going to be great.

Marissa: I have enjoyed listening the past few years, so I'm excited to be more part of the conversation.

Megan: Well, we hope you guys are excited about this amazing news, Well we're excited, we feel that it's amazing. I know change is hard, but it's what the prairie teaches us to do every day. So for now, just stay tuned for more next season. We're going to wish you a safe and peaceful holiday while you're watching the prairie grasses lodge with snow.

Mike: Nice. Happy holidays!

Marissa: Happy Holidays!

Sara: Happy holidays, everyone.

((Sounds of instrumental cheery music))